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Collaborative Leadership and an Evolving Military

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Authoritative flexibility refers to the capacity of the leader to flexibly assume the role as leader, follower, and peer, to different degrees when called for, and possibly even within the space of a single meeting.

Our leadership uses multiple frameworks to maximize organizational effectiveness.

Well organized and positive leadership profoundly impacts an establishment, including in our military and military healthcare systems. However, in the wake of lessons learned, after more than a decade of war, the nature of the military and [military medicine](#) is changing rapidly.

The evolving nature of conflict, as well as the increasing need for joint capabilities, a rapidly deployable and highly flexible force structure, and re-defined relationships with civilian expertise (for example, in the technology and information systems sectors), require re-examination of our chief leadership models and the introduction of new leadership examples that will serve our leaders who will be guiding the future of our military and military healthcare.

Collaboration – The Contemporary Challenge

To begin with I propose a new idea, which I call Collaborative Leadership. Many forward-thinking leadership models have been used before, and

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proven very useful, including transactional, transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership (Bass 1998; Bennis, 2007; Hackman & Wageman, 2007; and MacIntyre, Charbonneau, & O'Keefe, 2013). However, each of these models emphasizes the relationship between leaders and followers. The focus of theorizing is either on

1. Traits of the leader that allow for successful influence.
2. Interactions between leaders and those that they lead.
3. Individual situations that the leader faces that challenge his or her ability to effectively inspire and guide followers.

In each case the power differential is relatively clear between the leader and those being led. What is missing is a framework for understanding the behaviors of leaders in interaction with other leaders, and the personal qualities that make leaders most effective in situations where positional authority is vague, and where power differentials are fluid or non-existent. Filling this void is one of the principle aims of the collaborative leadership model. Because of this I'd like to introduce two principles of collaborative leadership: authoritative flexibility and receptive engagement.

Authoritative Flexibility – The Example of Military Medicine

Collaborative leadership emphasizes the relativity of positional authority, and for lack of a better term I'll call this authoritative

flexibility. Authoritative flexibility refers to the capacity of the leader to flexibly assume the roles of leader, follower, and peer, to different degrees when called for, and possibly even within the space of a single meeting. Military Medicine's current movement toward joint readiness across nearly all domains of training, credentialing, and mobilization and the co-location of all attorney general's under a single roof at [Defense Health Agency](#) means that our leaders will interact, negotiate, and compromise more than ever.

Military Medicine is increasingly moving toward regionally-based integrated service networks, where medical assets not only from the distinct service branches, but also from the civilian sector will unify to deliver cost-saving, high-quality, locally-tailored care. The leadership qualities and behaviors necessary for success in these endeavors may overlap with those articulated by other leadership models. However, the basic leader-follower paradigm implied in each of these models no longer holds in the same way, as leaders are positioned with other leaders and challenged to develop a new, shared mission and vision.

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Receptive Engagement – The Example of COIN



Receptive engagement is the capacity of a leader to listen fully to others completely, and deferring action briefly in lieu of thoughtful consideration.

Present leadership models emphasize active, assertive behavior and communication on the part of the leader. Without question, the abilities to act decisively and to be clear and articulate are vital to a leader's management skills.

Collaborative leadership places the emphasis on a different, companion set of skills: the capacity of the leader to actively listen and be truly receptive to the communications of others, while choosing inaction temporarily. It's a well-documented psychological

phenomenon that typically, as an individual listens to what someone else is saying, rather than truly listening they are in fact formulating their own responses, whether agreements or rebuttals, and missing significant portions of what the other is communicating.

Similarly, it's just as important to know when not to act, as it is to know when to act decisively. Receptive engagement is the capacity of a leader to listen fully to others, and deferring action briefly in lieu of thoughtful consideration.

During the Iraq War, the course of the war was significantly changed with the successful implementation of principles of counterinsurgency warfare (COIN). Three general principles inherent in COIN operations that distinguish it from conventional warfare principles are:

1. The more isolated and well-fortified troops remain, the less secure they in fact are.
2. Listening and responding to the needs of the local population are vital for the successful establishment of long-term security.
3. Military victories can't proceed, and are not distinct from, political solutions.

In each of COIN's principles it's necessary for embedded troops to be personally engaged with the local populace, have empathy with the history of the conflict, approach long-held grievances with understanding, and build alliances among groups that can't be lead and directed by outsiders, in the traditional sense.

Toward the Future

As our nation's military and Military Medicine move forward into a future increasingly characterized by joint readiness, a leaner and more flexible force, and increased contact and fluidity with the civilian sector, leadership models that capture the unique traits and behaviors of leaders in these new contexts must be developed.

Just as carpenters can't build using a single tool, there can truly be no single

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conceptual framework for leadership.

It's as varied as the personalities of successful leaders, and the unique circumstances in which they find themselves.

Hopefully the dialogue concerning viable leadership models, fitting a rapidly changing world, will continue.

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